



ISSUE BRIEF

‘FIXING THE RADIOS’ FOR ALL OF US: SETTING A TARGET DATE FOR NATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS INTEROPERABILITY

Since the tragic events of September 11th demonstrated that when first responders cannot communicate lives may be lost, numerous calls for action to solve the communications interoperability crisis have been made. After nearly five years and another reminder of public safety communications problems during Hurricane Katrina, the rhetoric about this national crisis has been followed by a lack of action, broken promises, and no clear strategy for fixing the problem. The absence of a national strategy has resulted in disjointed efforts to solve the problem at all levels of government. This bottom-up approach is not working, leaving firefighters, police officers and emergency medical personnel throughout the country still unable to talk to one another because their communications systems are incompatible.

The First Response Coalition (FRC) therefore calls upon the President to establish a **target date within the next decade** to “fix the radios” so that first responders can better protect our communities. Once the commitment to establishing a target date is announced, the White House should convene a National Interoperability Summit to best determine the appropriate date and begin developing a comprehensive interoperability implementation plan. A declarative national statement and directive from the highest levels of government is needed to mobilize and organize the interoperability efforts. Only by setting a target date for interoperability can the nation achieve this fundamental public safety goal, which provides for the common good. By harnessing the good work that already exists in the numerous interoperability programs and focusing on the common target of full interoperability, real progress can be made.

The FRC urges the President to announce his commitment to a national interoperability target date by **August 29, 2006 – the one year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.**

America has a proud history of its leaders committing the nation to attain ambitious goals. Perhaps most notably, in 1961 President John F. Kennedy issued a national challenge to land a man on the moon and return him safely to earth before the end of the decade. Just eight years later, Neil Armstrong was walking on the moon.

On January 14, 2004 President George W. Bush issued a similar challenge, calling on NASA and the nation to repeat a goal it had already attained: a return to the moon by 2020. Ensuring the safety of America’s first responders and the communities

they protect is no less important than sending Americans into space. In fact, the FRC believes it is more important to ensure the safety of Americans now and in the future.

Citizens in communities across the nation expect and deserve to be protected by rescue workers equipped with the resources necessary to save lives. Through strong leadership, ingenuity, and commitment, resolution of the communications crisis can be achieved within a decade.

WHY A TARGET DATE?

Each and every government report in the aftermath of recent national disasters has showcased the interoperability problems faced by first responders:

- The 9/11 Commission called upon Congress to expedite the assignment of additional radio spectrum for public safety purposes so that emergency responders can better communicate with each other. The successor organization to the Commission, the 9/11 Discourse Project, gave the Federal government a **failing grade on emergency communications**, calling the lack of spectrum available for public safety “scandalous.”
- The U.S. House of Representative’s report on the failed response to Hurricane Katrina, “A Failure of Initiative,” notes that **communications breakdowns** among first responders, a shortage of qualified emergency personnel, inadequate training and insufficient funding all conspired to doom an effective emergency response.
- The Senate’s report, “Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared,” notes that the **systems on which officials relied to support their response efforts failed**, and government officials at all levels failed to provide effective leadership.
- The White House’s “Lessons Learned” report issued after Hurricane Katrina stated that “equipment interoperability problems further hindered an integrated response. [The] lack of interoperable communications was apparent at the tactical level, resulting from the fact that emergency responders, National Guard, and active duty military use different equipment.”
- The Department of Homeland Security’s Office of the Inspector General released a report concluding that, among other things, FEMA’s response to Hurricane Katrina was hampered by untrained staff, **unreliable communication systems** and poor coordination.

After each disaster, elected officials and other policymakers renew their commitments for new funds, new programs, and new initiatives to resolve the communications crisis. The Department of Homeland Security’s SAFECOM program, the RapidCom program, and the National Interoperability Baseline Survey are just some of the examples of interoperability initiatives that have the potential to improve communications, but have fallen victim to bureaucracy and inefficiency. 24 Megahertz of spectrum from the digital television transition have been allocated for first responders but will not be fully available until 2009.

Potential and well-intentioned solutions abound, but the lack of coordination is hampering the efforts. There are Internet protocol technologies and applications that have yet to be fully utilized. Individual communities are making progress, but the lack of national strategy to coordinate these efforts and provide needed guidance stands as a major obstacle.

A national target date for interoperability, coupled with meaningful action and national leadership, will help to align these disparate programs and competing efforts so that they work together towards a common solution.

REACHING THE INTEROPERABILITY GOAL

Establishing a target date by itself will take extraordinary leadership. Achieving the ultimate goal of communications interoperability will require unprecedented collaboration, determination, and commitment. Nonetheless, it is imperative that we commit to this national goal in the interest of our common safety. Once the President has established a date certain, there are several actions that should be undertaken to begin the process of achieving nationwide interoperability:

1. The White House should host a National Interoperability Summit, with participants from the first response community, telecommunications and technology industries, scholars and experts, and policymakers to develop a roadmap for achieving interoperability.

2. The federal interoperability grant process must be streamlined to provide greater transparency and accountability. Currently, there are numerous agencies and sub-agencies that offer grants to first responders, and it is unclear how much money is being spent and where it is actually going. The wide range of publicly-reported figures on federal interoperability funding - from \$200 million to \$5 billion - demonstrates the need for better monitoring and allocation of grants. In order for the funds to find their way into programs designed to fix the interoperability problem, Congress needs to designate funds specifically for interoperability projects in the states. States and localities must also work together to identify how interoperability funds are being spent at the local level and develop some mechanism to measure how effectively those funds are being put to use.

3. A clear and effective process for state and local collaboration, as well as between government and industry, needs to be developed. Not only do localities often use different equipment, they have needs that are altogether different than state and federal emergency workers. Reports of political in-fighting and turf tussles are discouraging and only further delay resolution of the communications crisis. A national coordination and set of interoperability standards will help put all the affected parties on the path to seamless nationwide communications systems.

The First Response Coalition does not believe that a full plan for achieving interoperability is necessary prior to setting a goal for interoperability. A commitment by a creative and dedicated nation is the right place to start. The date certain will provide a

sense of urgency and efforts at all levels can be dedicated to meeting the goal. No longer will interoperability solutions be piecemeal and funding can be dedicated toward the plan, rather than spread across numerous entities.

President Kennedy did not lay out a detailed plan when he called for a mission to the moon. He committed the nation to this ambitious goal, provided the leadership and the resources for attaining it, and the nation's most innovative and creative thinkers accomplished a moon landing in just a few short years. America can and must follow a similar path to achieve communications interoperability for our heroic first responders.